

Biblical Storytelling as Spiritual Discipline Grounded in Scholarship
The Network of Biblical Storytellers
Dennis Dewey, 2011

The approach of the Network of Biblical Storytellers to the process of learning and telling the stories of scripture, and hence to the Network's mission of "encouraging everyone to learn and tell biblical stories" is rooted a tradition of prayerful spirituality and scholarship.

The word "spirituality" is bandied about freely today. Remarkably, the word is not found in scripture. And yet both First and Second Testaments presuppose and are suffused by it. For Israel the corollary commandment that follows immediately upon Deuteronomy's call to love Yahweh with all one's being (which Jesus identifies as the "greatest commandment") is this: "All these things that I am instructing you today shall be on your heart." As the center of the person, the heart is the repository of the tradition, the memory, the voiced word, the story. In the anatomy and physiology of this culture, the heart is the seat of thinking, feeling and deciding. As a metaphor for the whole person, the heart is the place where the totality of experience comes together. This, then, was Hebrew spirituality: the deep residence of the word at the core of a person's being. In a sense, telling the stories by heart is "putting them on the tongue" where their life is voiced. This practice, Rabbi Noah Weinberg states, is *arichat sfatayim*, which literally means "arrange it on your lips."¹

Yitzhak Buxbaum observes,

Hasidim say that when pious people sit and tell holy stories, God, so to speak, comes and listens, as is stated in Malachi 3:16-- "Then they that feared the Lord spake one with the other, and the Lord hearkened and heard." God, say hasidim, also loves to tell stories.²

In the early church, the experience of telling and hearing the stories of Jesus was sacramental. In the shared reality of the narrative, teller and audience came together as community to meet the risen Christ. The interactivity of storytelling was the basis of this spiritual experience.

The Network of Biblical Storytellers affirms that biblical storytelling takes many forms: from paraphrase to first-person monologue, to midrashic expansion, to contemporization. But the core activity that lies at the heart of all these variations is the deep internalization of the text as it has been traditioned to us in translation. In various publications, I have defined this text-based standard of NBS as:

¹ http://www.aish.com/spirituality/48ways/Way_3_Say_It_Out_Loud.asp

² http://www.hasidicstories.com/Articles/Hasidic_Theories/spirit.html

Biblical storytelling is a spiritual discipline that entails the lively expression, interpretation and animation of a narrative text of scripture that has first been deeply internalized and then is remembered,³ embodied, breathed and voiced by a teller/performer as a sacred event in community with an audience/congregation.⁴

Worth observing is that the predicate in this definition is “spiritual discipline.” The Network from its earliest days has affirmed that its practice is rooted in both prayer and scholarship and has seen the two as essential aspects of the story-formed community. The methodological dimensions of that spirituality—deep internalization as opposed to objectified “looking at ink on a page out there” leads to a new kind of prayer that is grounded in the experience of listening to God through what we hear in the stories in the deep recesses of the heart, conscious and subconscious place where the memory resides.

As important to our understanding of what we do as being grounded in prayerful spirituality is the notion that our work is informed by critical scholarship. In contrast to those circles in which the Bible is read only self-referentially, the Network embraces the scholarship of the historical-critical method, including form criticism, source criticism, redaction criticism, narrative criticism and performance criticism. It welcomes the insights of socio-political analysis, feminist theology, liberation theology and other approaches to the texts that attempt to understand them in their fullness and not as mere historical or scientific truth. In a sense, the scriptures (as the Word) are appreciated to have the kind of attributes classically ascribed to Jesus (as the Word): fully human and fully divine. The God-breathed texts are re-breathed by teller/performers, who use the same breath with which the Genesis creation story says God breathed into the first human (made from the humus of the earth) to enable the naming of things, understood as a kind of shorthand for “storytelling.”

For centuries the meaning of the stories of scripture lay in the *experience* of hearing them. The faithful located their own experience within the framework of that overarching story. What might be called the “realistic framework” of the story was held loosely and not tested historically. Hans Frei⁵ claimed that in the Enlightenment there was a shift away from the experience of the story as story and toward “meaning as reference,” so that the story came to be understood “as a reference source for knowing a reality beyond the story.”⁶ “[T]he narratives no

³ The word is used as a deliberate echo of the Eucharistic term that translates ἀνάμνησιν—more than simply remembering the past, but in some sense re-presenting it in the present moment.

⁴ Dennis Dewey, “Great in the Empire of Heaven: A Faithful Performance of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount,” *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount: The World It Imagines*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007, p. 71

⁵ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative*, New Haven and London: Yale University, 1974

⁶ Tom Boomershine, “The Reemergence of Biblical Narrative” accessed on 21 June 2011 at <http://www.tomboomershine.org/writings/ReemergenceOfBiblicalNarrative.pdf>

longer ha[d]... meaning as narratives but only as sources of history or theology.”⁷ Two broad views of this “meaning as reference” developed and gave rise to what today are commonly called the conservative and liberal wings of the church. The conservatives clung to meaning as reference to the “eternal truths.” The liberals located the meaning of the text with reference to the narrative’s historical/scientific verifiability.

In the wake of this shift, conservatives came to read the stories of scripture as an unambiguously non-contradictory system of doctrine. Liberals, on the other hand, identified the various strands as more or less supportive of historical facts, discounting the unscientific aspects of the narratives and looking for Jesus in history as, for example, the great moral teacher. What got lost in this shift was the experience of the story as story itself. Conservatives emphasize the story as characterized by inerrant, theological consistency for doctrinal purposes to lead to individuals’ salvation. Accompanying this perspective is the simplistic, uncritical assumption that the stories are all good and that, naturally, anyone can tell them with no critical training. There is a kind of naïve arrogance that attends this attitude that signals that knowing the story is all that is necessary. Liberals, on the other hand, moved away from the story as experience of narrative, rejecting the story as so fraught with antiquarian notions and superstitions as to be meaningless apart from the cold, hard reality of empirically verifiable historicity.

This uncritical approach today tends to go under the banner of “storying”—in part to avoid the supposed pejorative associations with the word “storytelling” as an activity that is considered to be fictive, made-up, untrue. This understanding is related to the assumption that the stories are a source of doctrine that leads to salvation. The current trend in these circles to downplay doctrine in favor of “storying” has even brought some negative reaction from that part of the conservative wing that emphasizes the primary value of stories as being sources for doctrine and the main reason for telling stories as the utilitarian function of illustrating doctrine. Practitioners of “chronological storying,” a development of the “storying” movement, are often unaware of how this approach can be employed in ways that are manipulative and destructive while purporting to be without interpretation. The Network, on the contrary, holds that every understanding of scripture entails interpretation. The approach employed by the storying movement is sometimes characterized by a kind of anti-intellectual bias and rejection of critical scholarship, mistaking the Reformation’s notion of “plain sense” for uninformed literalism. The purpose of such “storying” is often explicitly identified as “winning souls for Christ.” In other words, learning the stories has utilitarian value as tool of evangelism understood in this narrow sense. The Network has from its founding understood biblical storytelling as a means of inclusion in community, an understanding of evangelism as welcoming outsiders into a storied fellowship that is engaged in this activity as spiritual discipline for the strengthening the relationships in the body of Christ. The Network’s insistence on good scholarship as foundational to the community has functioned with respect to this understanding as part of a “best practices” effort to mitigate the potential misuses of storytelling and to avoid being inappropriate and manipulative.

⁷ Ibid.

The Network of Biblical Storytellers values the critical study of the texts and encourages those who learn the stories to be a part of a community that is grounded both in prayerful spirituality and scholarship. The Network of Biblical Storytellers uses the adjective “biblical” (versus “Bible”) in order to signal an understanding of the process of learning and telling the stories of scripture that embraces critical analysis by means of such disciplines as form criticism, performance criticism, narrative criticism and the like. The unabashed use of the term “storytelling” affirms that all narrative is, in a sense, “fictive,” that the art of storytelling has shaped the experience of the tradition that has passed through many telling and hearings, and that, theologically speaking, the same Holy Spirit that inspired (breathed into) the stories as they were told and retold before being written down still breathes in the community of faith that strives to internalize and tell them faithfully. This experience of the story that is non-uncritical permits a kind of informed or “second naiveté” in the telling the stories from faith to faith. We promote a post-text paradigm that we believe can transcend the old liberal/conservative divide—both approaches of which based in the “eclipse of the story,” as Hans Frei called it—in recognition of the pre-text practice of ancient Israel and the early church.

In a real sense Biblical storytelling thus understood is *truly* conservative in that it goes back to the sources, back to “before the book,” to recover and conserve for the future the character of the Bible as stories learned by heart and told by communities of people on the various sides of the divides in the religious community---as the composers of the Bible did in every stage of its development. It is also *truly* liberal in that it liberates our understanding of the text from *a priori* constraints and narrowness of doctrine and from an uncritical acceptance of the texts as historically accurate.

While not all practitioners of biblical storytelling can enjoy the benefit of a formal, scholarly education, all those who are engaged in learning and telling the stories by heart are encouraged to make the good use of the best scholarly tools available to them and to be in community with scholars who contribute to the evolving understanding of such disciplines as performance criticism, many of whom regularly offer workshops and lectures at the Festival Gathering of NBS.

Such an understanding of biblical storytelling as grounded in prayerful spirituality and scholarship and in a community rooted in these disciplines will inevitably challenge the culture’s alignment of Christian faith with capitalism, Americanism and colonialism and other cultural “isms.” Oral culture is tribal—composed for the most part of those who know each other face-to-face and hold common biological origins. Literate culture is oriented around beliefs and coalesces around those who share common beliefs, creeds, and ideological systems. Post-literate communities are global, transcending political, ethnic, tribal and national boundaries and oriented around a common story that people believe in but do not define or restrict or confine by any system of ideology. It is in this world that we, as biblical storytellers, live and move and have our being, and it is in this world that we encourage everyone to learn and tell biblical stories.